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IN EDUCATED WOMEN FARMERS LIES THE FUTURE OF INDIA

India's agrarian sector is diverse when it comes to the crops cultivated, the geography and climate they are raised in, and the technology adopted. We have an equally diverse workforce too – Small scale and marginal farmers, large farmers, tenants, contract farmers, male and female farmers.

Women of the farming sector are although never in the spotlight, though they form nearly 75% of the full-time workers on Indian farms. In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of cultivators and about 47% per cent of agricultural labourers. In South Asian countries, 60% to 80% of the food produced is by the women of the region. They form the back bone of agriculture.

Statistics such as these have never been a catalyst for any palpable change in the approach adopted by the governments towards formulating a policy that espouses the significance of women in farming. Their lives continue to remain in the fringes – toiling in the fields in the shadow of a male relative. Many of the works they engage in is labour-intensive, and most of it is unskilled labour.

Women in agriculture are unaware of their potential. They are unaware of the new developments in the field. Pamphlets, brochures, training modules never reach them. There are no ways to increase their skill set. Also women in India face extreme disadvantage in terms of pay, land rights, and representation in local farmers' organizations.

The reason behind this sorry state of affairs is illiteracy. An estimated 52–75% of Indian women engaged in agriculture are illiterate. This prevents them from venturing into skilled labour sectors. Lack of knowledge makes them work on low wages. In some instances it is as low as 70 percent of men's wage. Sometime their labour is unaccounted and they are unpaid. The lack of employment mobility and education render the majority of women in India vulnerable.

What we need is a formal acknowledgement from the government of the unaccounted labour they contribute. Being an indispensable component of agriculture sector, their role needs to be strengthened. This is possible only by educating them. Educating them will make them aware of the developments in agriculture. They can increase their skill set and hence the way they practise farming. It will make them aware of their rights. Giving women access to education can increase food production by them. Earning extra income will enable them to spend on health care, nutrition, and education for their children—investments that can produce long-term, positive results for farm families.

Empowering women in agriculture is essential if we want to see a bright future for agriculture. That empowerment can only come from education. In educated women farmers lies the future of India.

